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ABSTRACT

In addition to serving as executive enclosures, offices illustrate organizational goals and reflect the communication climate of the organization. Traditional office designs accentuate personal territory, in which communication is largely controlled by the occupant of the office, and space often becomes a symbol of status. One of the first major breaks from traditional office arrangement was an open office plan called office landscaping. Furniture and equipment were arranged in clusters in staggered patterns on a flat surface, and managers were taken out of their private offices and placed on the floor among subordinates. Another office design is the multiple activity setting, in which employees move to different activity settings as tasks change. The emphasis is on sharing the equipment and making more effective use of the office workforce. A third design concept is the total office support system that relies on electronic mail system, note processing facility, and other means of communication. While office designs are still the prerogative of management, organizations are increasingly turning to "space" committees to coordinate the office design project. What is emerging is not an approach but rather a number of approaches to office design dependent upon particular organizational objectives. (HOD)

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OFFICE DESIGN: THE SPATIAL DIMENSION OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION AND REFLECTOR OF COMMUNICATION CLIMATE

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OFFICE DESIGN: THE SPATIAL DIMENSION
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Offices serve as executive enclosures, but also illustrate organizational goals and reflect the communication climate. The planning of an office, whether a new facility or a re-arrangement of an existing one, requires a team effort--management, personnel, designers, consultants, and architects. This paper will (a) examine traditional and contemporary office designs, (b) provide case instances suggesting communication strategies/intervention techniques, and (c) explore the communication climate underlying office structure.

For an office design to be effective in terms of organizational goals compatible with the human element, a number of criteria should be considered by management. An ogjective analysis should be made to determine appropriate design for the organization in question. What is workable for one type of office might be disastrous for another. With the complexity of business on the increase and no indication of a reversal of this trend, it has become all important for companies to choose a physical layout that is flexible enough to accommodate present work situations with allowance for change that is not cost prohibitive. Cost-wise, productivity needs to be increased and increased in a smaller space, but not at the cost of decreased awareness of the physical, psycho-

logical, and social needs of workers. Deal and Kennedy observe that "people are a company's greatest resource" but their productivity can be affected by office design.[1] The physical structure (walls, corridors, and floors) of an organization influences work performance and communication flow. Rogers and Rogers note that "organizational structure determines physical structure, which determines communication behavior."[2] Thus, office design, organizational productivity, and communication behavior are intimately related.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first part is a discussion and examination of traditional versus contemporary office designs. The second part provides case instances relating office design to organizational goals and communication behavior. The third part explores the communication climate underlying office structure.

Traditional Versus Contemporary Office Design

Traditional office designs accentuate personal territoriality. Here the office is your "castle" and who-to-whom communication is largely controlled by the occupant of the office. The traditional or closed office design adheres to feature-fixed space, unmoving clearly defined. Space is marked by solid walls and doors. With this office design philosophy, space can easily become a symbol of status and often does. Pecking order in an organization may be determined by square feet of space, size of desk, number of windows, and quality of carpet. Procedures and functions of the organization are carefully monitored and tend to become static. Still, most

people feel comfortable in a traditional setting. You know that success has finally come when you have a corner office, a magnificent view, a desk of dark mahagony, original oil paintings, and a thick carpet. Such status symbols shout to the world that you've arrived.

However, such signs of success are less evident in the business world today. Today the needs of the organization, including management and employees, must be met before a plan can be considered effective. In the late 40's and 50's time and motion studies and an increased complexity of business led to office planning with an emphasis on efficient work flow. Organizations were equally concerned with communication flow and supportive cultural climates. By the 60's new research proved that employees and machines were not one and the same. Office environments took on more interest and personality with a direct relationship between improved employee morale and increased productivity.[3] Increased productivity became a major concern of management but not without due respect for the needs of employees. Employees had come to expect management to provide an environment with proper air movement and temperature, clean and sanitary facilities, equipment that is kept in good repair, security, and an area for breaks and relaxation.[4] The Occupational Health and Safety Act passed by Congress in 1970 insures that companies will be legally concerned with the work environment of their employees.[5] So, employee concerns, productivity, and organizational objectives became intimately fused with office design. No longer were offices just places of business.

The city of Bellaire, Texas, an incorporated suburb within the confines of Houston, built a new city hall in 1981. Each employee was asked to make two lists, one a wish list where money was no object and one a list of actual needs. There were collated by the design team who returned three times for further information gathering. Each time a compromise was made until the employee felt satisfied with his/her allotted space. When McDonald's new eight-story office complex in a suburb of Chicago was in the planning stage a series of questionnaires and in-depth interviews with department heads was conducted by Associated Space Designs, Inc of Atlanta. Each employee was invited to a special showroom to choose his/her optinnal equipment and furnishings. Each employee received the same high-quality of furnishings.[6] Conversely, when Conoco in Houston recently built their new office complex, employees were not included in the design planning. The acceptance by employees has been slower than that by the employees at McDonald's. Companies now have to meet the psychological and social needs of employees. However, office designs must also be compatible with their cultural system.

In the 70's companies also began to show more moral responsibility to the public at large in office design. The special needs of the handicapped and elderly were now addressed. Some of the features that were installed in buildings and offices were: ramps and wide doors and cooridors for wheelchairs, lower drinking fountains and towel dispensers, easily operated faucets, raised electrical outlets, braille signs for the blind, and accessible plumbing facilities. Some designers, concerned with energy waste, introduced "task lighting" where high illumination was provided only

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over immediate work surfaces.[7] Office design now is equally concerned with the external public. Who is served becomes an important factor in organizational structure.

Case Studies

In this age of mushrooming information with an emphasis on communication, organizations are beginning to rethink office design. Some have decided that desirable objectives would be to encourage informal exchange, to be able to assign people to different work teams, to make specialized equipment more accessable, and to encourage initiative and flexibility. Managers now have to rethink how information and people flow in an office, what kinds of behavior are to be encouraged or discouraged, and foster a plan that is consonant with the goals of the company.[8]

Office Landscaping

One of the first major breaks from traditional office arrangement took place in the Hamburg suburb of Quickborn, Germany in the 1960's. There a design team, which later took the name Quickborner Team, devised an office system that made use of the least space for the most people. The new concept was an open office plan called "burolandshaft" literally translated meaning "office landscaping." A later term that has become interchangeable is "open landscaping." Furniture and equipment are arranged in clusters in staggered patterns on a flat surface. Managers are taken out of their private offices and placed on the floor among subordinates. Potted plants are used to mark space boundaries or portable screens, desks, filing cabinets and bookcases may serve as markers to

delineate individual work space or stations. Arrangement of furniture and equipment is made according to the organization's flow of work and communication.[9] See Appendix A.

The acceptance of this new approach was evident in the proliferation of manufacturers who implemented numerous designs for furniture used in landscaping. The Quickborner Team's first American showcase was the offices of Eastman Kodak in Rochester, New York in 1968. At Kodak, ten to twenty per cent of office space was reconfigured each year at a per-square foot cost of between two dollars and seventeen dollars. Moveable partitions reduced this cost to thirty-five cents and there was the added advantage of high tax-depreciation write-offs. But accountants weren't the only ones to see the advantage of moveable, flexible furniture and equipment. Management discovered that an open plan reduced barriers to communication, encouraged interaction among employees, and freed the flow of information with the end result being increased productivity. Productivity is a major concern of companies, and 2,400 interior designers recently polled said they were working on office designs to increase productivity. Ninty-three percent of these designers believed that flexible workspace contributes to productivity.[10]

Probably the most exciting example of open landscaping are the offices of McDonald's International headquarters. They have become such a tourist attraction that a guide has been hired to conduct tours. If one stands on a chair, there is no obstruction of the view from one end of the building to the other. Employee workstations consist of a specially designed furniture unit called the "Task Response Module." This module is a low wooden partition

which doubles as room divider and fold-out work area. It holds a desk, table, phone, drawers, coat closet, bulletin board, bookcase, and electrical wiring. The units are placed in irregular angles rather than in rows and offer privacy and openness at the same time. The traditionally isolated switchboard operators are placed out on the floor in low, upholstered bunkers. The operators have a full view of what is going on but maintain quiet and privacy when seated, with the flexibility of being able to talk with people when standing. Only the computer room with required temperature control is in a closed area. All levels of management are visible and share this open environment which helps create a status-free atmosphere. Deep carpeting, acoustical ceilings, chamoislike vinyl covering on walls, foam covering on file cabinets and wood modules, and four hundred large plants serve as sound abssrbers to reduce noise, a potential problem with office landscaping. McDonald's has also found that an open design discourages loud talking; people lower their voices automatically. The color scheme is deliberately kept neutral and employees are encouraged to supply color with their personal touches--dress, posters, pictures, and momentoes. Each of the three floors of offices has varied arrangements. Included on each are padded circular conference rooms, a large meeting room, audio-visual center, employee lounge with kitchen, lunch tables, and lounge chairs. Abstract sculpture is placed at various points. The most unique feature of the office design is the "think-tank." In contrast to the open spaces, the "think-tank" is a cocoon which is open to all employees who may reserve it by making an appointment. One enters through a hatch and into a

padded labyrinth divided into two parts. One part is a workroom with adjustable table and a bean-bag chair. The meditation capsule has a nine-foot diameter water bed floor covered in a deep, soft, furry fabric. A control panel on the side adjusts the lights, operates a tape deck, or pipes in stereo music.[11] See Appendix B.

McDonald's went beyond the Quickborner goal of improving basic operations to achieving a stated objective of psychological improvement. The new layout promotes high spirits with low employee turnover despite the flux of periodic departmental realignment. Turnover, according to Tom Waterson, Director of Facilities and New Projects, has dropped to a quarter of what it formerly was and communications have become more direct with less factionalism. McDonald's approach to open planning is human-oriented.[12]

Lone Star Life Insurance Company, a division of K-Mart, has also opted for open landscaping in their new quarters on Midway Road in Dallas. The first floor atrium lobby rises three floors containing a cafeteria, barber shop, bookstore, gift shop, and other shops for the convenience of employees and visitors. The reception area for the insurance company is located on the second floor. All visitors must be escorted by an assigned employee to enter the office areas from the third to the eleventh floor. Elevators can only be operated by an employee inserting a plastic card into a slot. These procedures were implemented to maintain tight security of company information. In the tradition of being at the top, the twelfth through fourteenth floors are executive offices. The open landscaping plan is used for employee's offices. Employee work stations with moveable partitions are placed in a staggered pattern with access to central computer stations. The

floor supervisor is situated in an accessible position on the floor. The company's organizational structure places a floor supervisor over a team leader who is superior to a group leader. The physical groupings of employee work stations reflect this structure which stresses the team approach to management.

Open landscaping has been a welcome alternative to closed design, but it has not proved to be a panacea for all ills and may create problems. The major disadvantage is that most people still are not accustomed to working in an open environment. Noise can be a problem and freer interaction between people can be distracting. The Frank Lloyd Wright designed Johnson Wax headquarters is expansive and grand but the open office plan exposes workers to distractions around them.[13] Upper-level management has been reluctant to give up private offices. They do not want to relinquish space as a status symbol nor the use of "furniture language" to establish a position of power.[14]

Multiple Activity Settings

Two members of Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Philip J. Stone and Robert Luchetti, take issue with open landscaping in view of increased worker activity and information sharing within smaller areas. Their premise is that cubliclelandshould be reconsidered. One all-purpose workstation per person no longer suffices. Employees are engaged each day in "multiple activities" and they need "multiple activity settings" to support a wide range of work tasks. For some tasks, people need to be included and to participate, other times they need a quiet place to think things through, specialized resources may be needed to

accomplish a task, whereas a pencil and paper will be what is needed for some jobs. As tasks change, employees should be able to move to different activity settings. The emphasis is on sharing the equipment and making more effective use of the office workforce. Bureaucratic entrenchment is avoided when temporary ad hoc groups are formed allowing management to use worker's abilities in innovative ways which in turn can make jobs more interesting for employees.[15]

Stone and Luchetti's proposal for "multiple activity settings" is directed toward the large, dense network office with complex and overlapping communications. If spatial distances become too wide, face-to-face communication drops considerably. One is more likely to interact when others are in close proximity; a decrease takes place at about forty feet, and reaches a low level by sixty to seventy feet.[16] These barriers can be bridged by electronic technology. Electronic bulletin boards and mailing systems link people in different parts of an organization. With the push of buttons, appointments and meeting places can be scheduled and equipment reserved. Employees who are involved in many activities and are temporarily a part of multiple teams simultaneously must be away from their desk often. Employees need small portable computer terminals small enough to be carried in a pocket to help them stay plugged into the network.[17]

Only limited experimentation has been done with this non-territorial office concept. See Appendix C and Appendix D. In such an arrangement, employees work together in shared activity centers and work on individual projects in any available area; no

area is designated an individual's own space or territory. This layout may work agreeably for a self-contained group within a larger unit but a home-base or workstation is still needed by most employees to reinforce a sense of stability and identity. Instead of a low partition that only affords partial privacy, a home-base should be completely enclosed, but preferably adjoin a "bullpen" area for informal conferences and work sessions. So, the activity-settings approach uses partitions to delineate boundries but offers more flexibility than the Qucikborner system. Moveable walls are suspended from an overhead track support. The size of home-bases, bullpens, conference rooms, storage rooms, and equipment centers can be easily changed to fit the needs of the users of the space. An organization's objectives to provide an environment that influences employee participation and collaboration while providing privacy are best supported by the activity-settings design system.

Total Office Support System

The Cummins Engine Company in Columbus, Indiana has achieved a three percent gain in productivity with a new system of office automation--the Total Office Support System (TOSS). The company's objective was to have a uniform integrated message system that connected the entire organization. Being a worldwide organization of 20,000 employees, their needs were special. Representatives from each major division came together to define office needs that should be accomplished electronically and to voice opinions about design. The Total Office Support System was their choice. A pilot group of seventy employees were trained to use the system and they they were used as resource persons to teach other users

which now number 7,800 people. This electronic system is a compact unit which fits in an individual work station. The five functions of TOSS are: (1) electronic mail system, (2) note processing facility, (3) electronic facility for group discussion, (4) resource scheduling facility to set up meetings, and (5) provides status reports on work in progress. TOSS provides employees with the means to get more detailed information to more people faster at less cost. Ninty percent of the company's usage is messaging, either in two-line notes or short messages which are usually responded to within one to four hours. The absence of secretarial screening speeds up the response rate. Cummins believes this system supports a more cooperative workgroup philosophy.[18]

These are but a few of the new innovations in office design. The success of new office designs varies directly with the amount of involvement and orientation the space committee provides to the staff. People tend to resist change, and a period of adjustment is needed. When Conoco's employees moved to their new facility across town from the former location, they were expected to cope immediately with a new location, all new furnishings and equipment, and an abrupt departure from a more traditional physical layout. The new design is for an automated office, completely paperless, and without provision for storing paper documents. A nice idea until the computer breaks down which is several times a week. Before Standard Oil of Indiana moved its 6,000 employees into the new open landscaping offices in Chicago, some employees were placed in an "open test office" for two years.[19] Stone and Luchetti also advocate a gradual transition to the innovative activity-setting

design.[20] People need time to discover for themselves that privacy can be maintained in a shared setting, and become accustomed to the new climate.

Communication Climate and Office Structure

Communication climate and organizational structure as aspects of organizational behavior have been well researched.[21] Even office structure has been given serious consideration, particularly by time and motion experts. Their primary concern was with productivity. But, the viewpoint now emerging is that communication, under certain conditions, may be a determinant of structure. We have just discussed some office designs that address this fairly new perspective. The question now being asked: "For whom is the space designed?"

While office designs are still the prerogative of management, organizations are increasingly turning to "space" committees to coordinate the office design project. Gensler and Brandt suggest that such a committee consist of an architect, designer, consultant(s), management, and personnel. A programmer should then be appointed by the committee to interview employees to gain information as to their office needs and wishes. A small organization may only require ten minute interviews with employees while in a large organization only selected employees may be audited with considerably more time being given to gathering and collating information. Who-to-whom communication network sociograms may then be constructed as a step toward evolving an optimum physical environment, which may in turn bring about organizational changes.[22] And, true office

planning does not end when construction is complete but is an on-going process of evaluation, change and improvement. Questionnaires and interviews that involve employees should be conducted to resolve problems and determine changes and refinements. A post-occupancy evaluation is a must if management is to discover if stated objectives are being achieved through effective use of space.[23]

The objectives being sought today in office design certainly involve cost and productivity but are also intimately related to communication effectiveness/climate. Internal/external use, flexibility, employee enrichment, decision making/problem solving, brainstorming capabilities, and image are among the factors being given serious consideration relative to office design today. For example, a growing number of firms have been buying works of art partly as an image-maker but also to stimulate creativity and pride among employees. The Joseph E. Seagram Company has 2,000 works of art, Atlantic-Richfield 9,000, and Pudential Insurance 8,000 works. And, many of these organizations allow employees to select paintings for their offices without regard to their position on the organizational chart as a way of enriching their work environment. Parenthetically, some employees become so attached to a particular piece that they complain when they have to part with it for an art exhibition.[24]

The research in communication climate and office structure is till in an enfant stage. Further studies are needed to assess the long-term effects of these new office designs upon the organizational system(s). What is certain is that they provide new and different opportunities for tomorrow.

Summary

This paper has examined traditional and contemporary office design, provided case instances of the new approaches to office design, and discussed communication climate and the underlying office structure. While all the data is not in and further research questions need to be explored, certain conclusions do appear. Just as integrated circuitry has replaced individual tubes in electronic technology, so too are integrated office structures replacing traditional models. And, what is emerging is not a approach but rather a number of approaches to office design dependent upon particular organizational objectives. These objectives are determined in concert with management and employees who then jointly participate in the eventual design of work space. Effective communication is an integral component of these new office systems.

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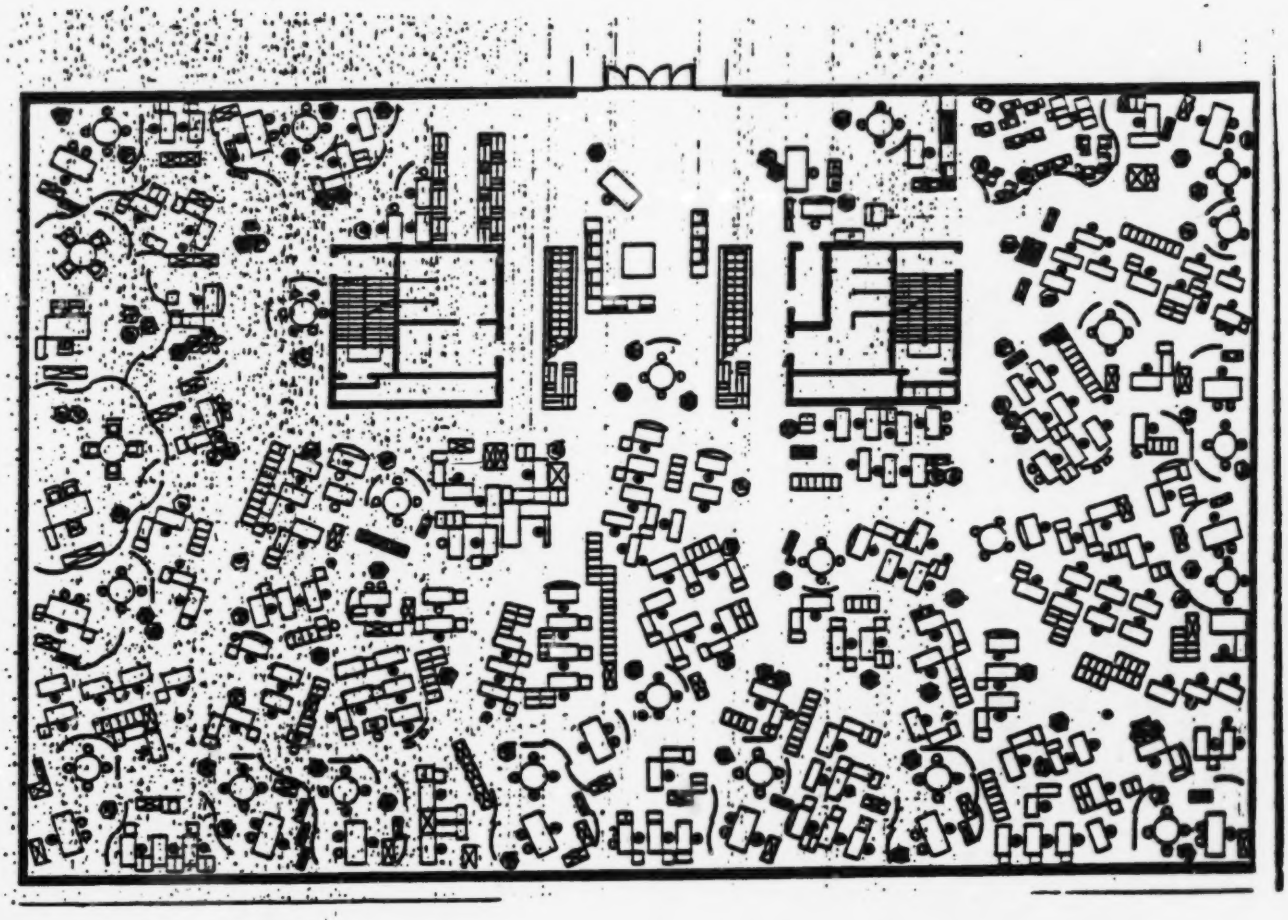
APPENDIX A

The Quickborner Office Landscape



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APPENDIX B

McDonald's Headquarters

Paul Dickson. The Future of the Workplace. New York: Weybright and Talley, 1975, 282.

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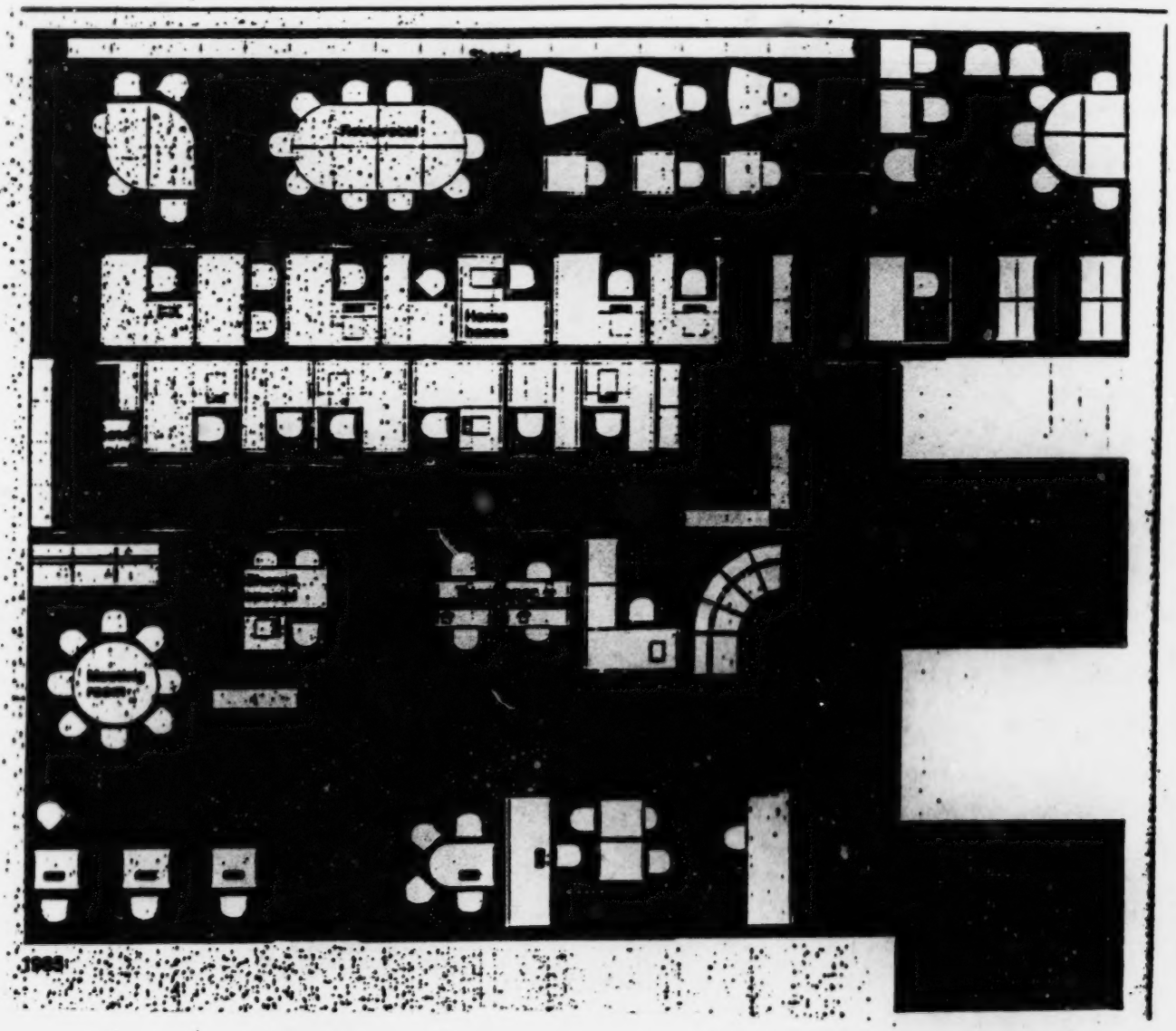
APPENDIX C

Activity Settings Illustrated: 1985-1995



Philip J. Stone and Robert Luchetti, "Your Office is Where You Are," Harvard Business Review (March-April, 1985), 112.

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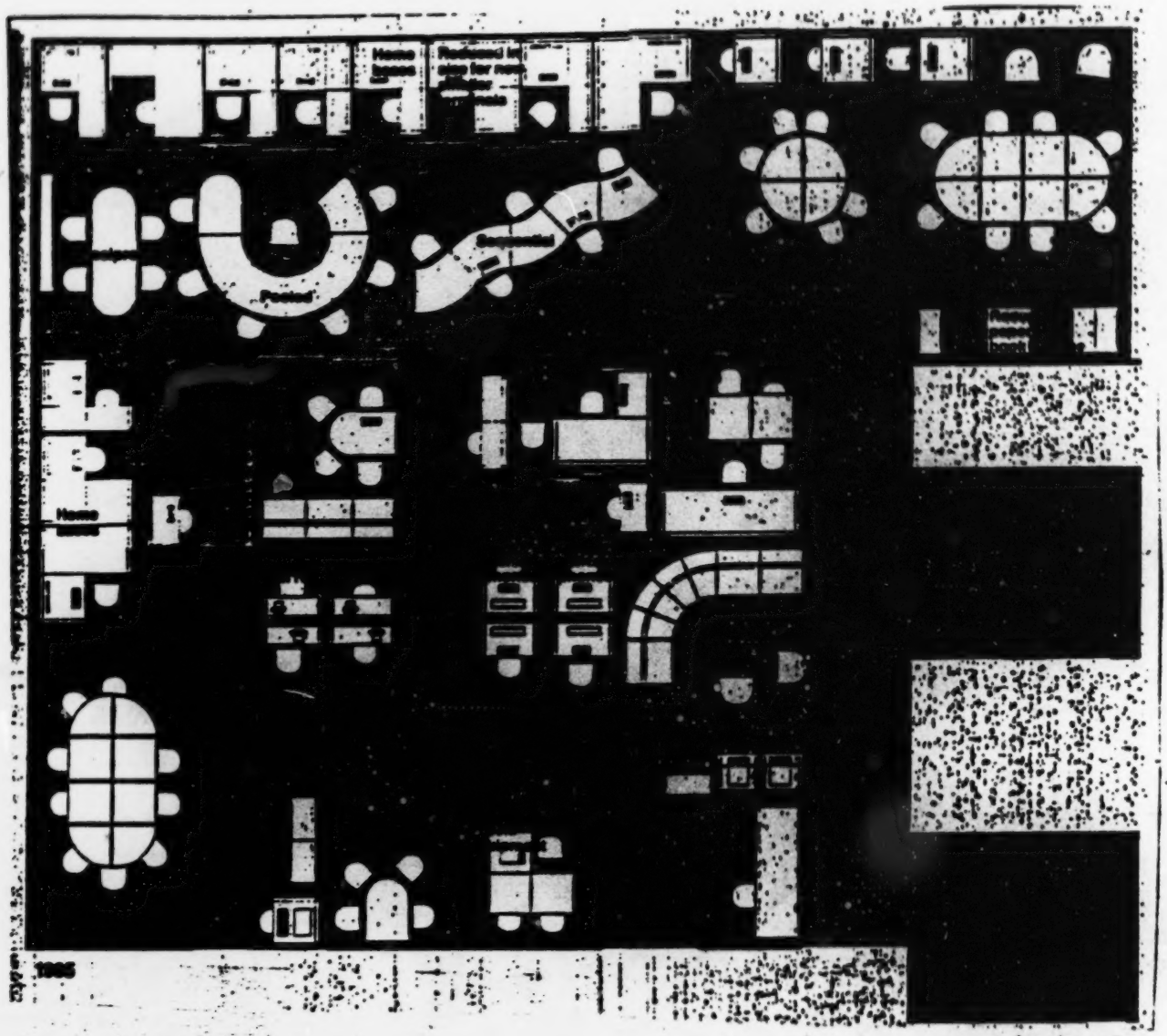
APPENDIX D

Activity Settings Illustrated: 1985-1995



Philip J. Stone and Robert Luchetti, "Your Office is Where You Are," Harvard Business Review (March-April, 1985), 113.

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